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HOUSEHOLD CALENDAR,

Suggestions on Reconditioning the House After a Flood

A radio interview between Miss Ruth Van Deman, Bureau of Home Economics, and Morse Salisbury, Radio Service, delivered in the Department of Agriculture period, National Farm and Home Hour, broadcast by WMAL and 49 other stations associated with the National Broadcasting Company, Thursday, March 26, 1936.

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MR. SALISBURY:

Now, turning to the household part of our program today, your friend, Ruth Van Deman, is here at the other microphone, ready to take over in her usual adequate way.

MISS VAN DEMAN:

Well, I feel anything but adequate to the subject today. Cleaning up and reconditioning a house after flood waters have stood in it is a job to stagger Hercules.

Of course, the first thing people look to following a flood is the sanitary precautions. State and local health authorities and the Red Cross workers, along with the WPA and CCC folks are doing that splendidly throughout the flood areas.

However, following the phase of safeguarding against epidemics and pests comes the long, slow heart-breaking individual work of reconditioning damaged houses and furniture.

And that's where the information I have gathered to report today may be of some assistance. I was started on collecting such facts by an SOS appeal from the New Jersey Extension Service.

They asked me to send all information that the Department of Agriculture has that might help women to put their houses in condition again after these dreadful floods. Naturally I put that ahead of everything else. I sent off a dozen or more bulletins to New Jersey that day. I hope they'll be of some use to the home demonstration agents and to the farm families they are helping in getting the houses back into livable conditions again.

In the course of gathering up this material, I had a long talk with Mr. T. A. H. Miller of the Bureau of Agricultural Engineering. Mr. Miller helped in the flood relief work in Vermont in 1927. I wish he could be here to tell you himself some of the very practical things he learned up there in Vermont. But he has to be in New York today at a very important conference, so Mr. Salisbury and I will do our best to pass along Mr. Miller's suggestions. Mr. Salisbury, suppose you lead off with the points about the house itself.

SALISBURY:

Well, Mr. Miller says that the first thing they learned in Vermont was how to deal with the problem of getting the house dried out. That may mean pumping out the cellar and shoveling mud. This can't be done until the ground water has receded. Then there must be plenty of air and heat circulating through the rooms. Oftentimes the window frames are so watersoaked and swollen that it's impossible to raise the windows. But Miller found he could take the beading off the window frames, and then go outside and force the sash in. It was useless to try to pry up the windoes in the ordinary way.

And it was generally hard to get the heating apparatus working, because of the mud and silt that lodged in pipes and casings as the water receded. So that mud must be scraped out of the inside of stoves and furnaces before building a fire. In a hot-water heating system even the inside of the fire pot has to be washed out. The cookstove needs to be practically taken apart, and each part cleaned and wiped dry.

Then after the stove is clean and dry rub it over with a rag dipped in kerosene before you build the fire. Later, to keep the metal from rusting, sometime when the fire is low and the stove almost cool, rub the iron part with lard or some fat that has no salt in it. Be sure to wash and dry the inside of the oven also. Miller said that some of the people up there in the flooded district where he was, overlooked the lining of the oven in their stoves and thay had a lot of trouble later.

VAN DEMAN:

In an electric stove, there must be danger that moisture has seeped into the wiring.

SALISBURY:

Yes, and that isn't the only danger. The whole wiring system as well as all electric equipment in a house that's been flooded should be tested by an electrician to see if there are any short circuits. The equipment must not only be dried; it must be cleaned. Take a washing machine, for instance. If the motor of a washing machine has stood in flood water, mud may have settled between the armature and the casing. If you attempted to run a motor in that condition it would be ruined.

VAN DEMAN:

I understand that in some communities where there have been floods, people have arranged to have the motors taken from all their household appliances to a central place where they can be dried out and inspeced so they'll be absolutely safe.

SALISBURY:

A very good idea. And speaking of washing machines, what do Miss O'Brien and your textile people say about getting the mud stains out of cotton clothes and sheets and other household fabrics? That's a big problem.



MISS VAN DEMAN: You're right, it is. They say that if fabrics are very badly stained with flood water carrying red or yellow clay, it's just about impossible to get it snowy white again. Under those circumstances any woman might as well make up her mind to use coffee colored sheets and towels for awhile. The color in clay stains is almost like iron rust. It may bleach out before the fabric wears out, and it may not. Miss O'Brien gives a special caution against over-bleaching clothes and household fabrics stained by flood water, and also against putting them in hot soap-suds first. That will set the stains. She says first rinse the mud-stained fabrics several times in cold water. That will take out some of the soil that has worked its way in between the fibers of the cloth.

Then when no more dirt can be rinsed out, wash the articles in warm soap-suds. In extreme cases you might try bleaching white cottons and linens in a weak solution of oxalic acid. Be sure to rinse out all the oxalic acid thoroughly from the cloth to get out the last traces of the mud; it also helps to give a final rinse in ammonia water. Also don't forget for a moment that oxalic acid is a poison and must not be left around the house unlabeled or where children can get it. The usual kind of laundry bleach won't be of much help on fabrics stained by flood water.

MR. SALISBURY: What about rugs and carpets? Is there much that can be done for them at home?

MISS VAN DEMAN: It's generally best to let rugs and carpets dry out thoroughly and then get out as much of the soil as possible with the broom or the vacuum cleaner. It is possible to shampoo a rug with soap jelly made from a good neutral soap. Put the soap on only a small section of the rug at a time, and rinse it out thoroughly with clear water before going on to the next place. Then put the rug where it will dry quickly if possible. Of course if the rug has already stood in flood water for days there's not much use to worry about the color fading and about spots and shrinking. But that's what often happens under ordinary circumstances when you try to shampoo a rug at home. A commercial cleaner of course has equipment for going over the whole surface quickly, and for rinsing out the soap and drying the rug so it won't shrink and fade. But we're not talking about ideal methods here.

MR. SALISBURY: No, far from it. The floors in a flood-damaged house are likely to warp and buckle so they never will be smooth again. Miller says he saw floors that looked like washboards. It was impossible to make those floors smooth again. So after the house dried out, some people just drew the flooring back into place with large nails, preferably cement coated, and laid a new floor on top of the old one. Some put down heavy felt base and laid linoleum. If only the finish of the floors is damaged, then it's a comparatively simple, but I won't say an easy, job to refinish the wood. Miss Van Deman, your bureau has a bulletin that tells how to do that, I believe.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes, our bulletin on "Floors and floor coverings" gives directions for refinishing various kinds of wood floors. And our bulletin on housecleaning has a lot of information about cleaning and caring for the house and the furnishings. Naturally it wasn't intended for any such extreme conditions as flood damage, but some of the suggestions may be helpful.

MR. SALISBURY: And I take it that anybody who writes you can have those bulletins. They aren't limited just to people whose homes have been damaged by the flood.

MISS VAN DEAN: No, certainly not. I'll be glad to send out bulletins on housecleaning, and floors and floor coverings, and stain removal from textiles to anybody who listens to the Farm and Home Hour.

Our housecleaning bulletin has a simple recipe for making a furniture polish at home. Of course no furniture polish will restore the finish to furniture that's been seriously damaged by water. If you want to refinish any pieces of furniture, write to your State College of Agriculture and ask for directions. I'm sorry we can't help you on that. The Department of Agriculture hasn't put out anything about refinishing furniture.

MR. SALISBURY: Now just one suggestion about getting rid of the rank unpleasant odors that hang around a house after it's been flooded. Chloride of lime sprinkled around in the basement and maybe also on papers spread in the corners of the rooms seems to be most effective in absorbing this odor. Let the lime stand on the basement floor until it's dry. Then sweep it up and scrub the floor thoroughly. Of course, after the first rough job of drying out the house and furnishings is finished, more damage will develop - plaster may fall off, for example. Dealing with that sort of a problem is another story. Perhaps we can go into it another time.